

DOCTOR  
MOM CHUNG  
OF THE  
FAIR-HAIRED  
BASTARDS

The Life of a  
Wartime Celebrity

DY TZU-CHUN WU



# Doctor Mom Chung of the Fair-Haired Bastards

*The Life of a Wartime Celebrity*

Judy Tzu-Chun Wu

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*For my parents  
Betty Chao-Hua Huang Wu  
and John Yu-Pu Wu*

*For my life partner  
Mark*

*And for Konrad  
for transforming me into a mom*

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# Introduction

During World War II, Mom Chung's was *the* place to be in San Francisco. Soldiers preparing for departure to the Pacific arena of war or on leave from their duties went to eat good comfort food there. They consumed vast quantities of BBQ ribs, red beans, and chocolate cake, making up for the dreariness of military fare. They swapped stories with each other over drinks at the bar. They also caught glimpses of and actually talked with some of the foremost celebrities of their time: John Wayne, Ronald Reagan, Tennessee Williams, Helen Hayes, Sophie Tucker, Tallulah Bankhead, and many others. At Mom Chung's, they met prominent politicians and military leaders like Kentucky senator and future commissioner of baseball "Happy" Chandler and U.S. Navy fleet admiral Chester W. Nimitz.

Mom Chung's was not a restaurant or a nightclub. It was the private residence of Dr. Margaret Jessie Chung, the first known American-born woman of Chinese descent to become a physician. She hosted these weekly Sunday parties for seventy-five to a hundred people in her modest-sized home. Then in her fifties, she cooked the food herself and made the rounds to ensure that her guests felt welcome. After all, almost all of them were members of her adopted family. The celebrities, the politicians, the highly ranked, and the common soldiers were bound to each other through her, their surrogate mother. Their ties stemmed not from blood connection but from their mutual affection for one another and their common dedication to the Allied cause.

Chung's family, which grew to approximately fifteen hundred members, served as a vital political resource during the international conflicts of the 1930s and 1940s. She claimed to have recruited pilots from among her "sons" for the Flying Tigers, the American volunteer force that fought in support of China during the Sino-Japanese War. Once the United States formally entered World War II, she used her contacts to lobby for the creation of WAVES, the Women's Naval Reserve. Described as a serious, commanding, almost regal, person, Chung nevertheless had a bawdy sense of humor. Because she never married and could offer no legitimate father figure for her mostly white and male children, they became known as Mom Chung's "Fair-Haired Bastards."

Despite her pioneering achievements and colorful style, Margaret Chung has all but disappeared from historical memory.<sup>1</sup> This biography seeks to refocus public attention on her life by exploring two questions: How did Chung accomplish what she did in her professional, political, and personal life? And, how do her experiences provide insight into the historical transformation of American norms regarding race, gender, and sexuality over the course of her lifetime?

Born in Santa Barbara, California, in 1889, Chung was the eldest child in a large impoverished family. Raised as a Christian by her immigrant parents, she aspired to serve as a medical missionary in China so she could offer both physical and spiritual healing to her ancestral people. Prevailing racial and gender barriers, in addition to her family's poverty, posed serious challenges to this dream, however. Just seven years before her birth, the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting the widespread hostility toward people of Chinese ancestry, the legislation barred Chinese laborers from entering the country and denied all immigrants from China the right to obtain citizenship through naturalization. Born on U.S. soil, Chung automatically qualified as a member of the American polity. Her parents, who had arrived in the 1870s, would remain perpetual aliens. Furthermore, residing in a state known for its virulent anti-Chinese politics would remind all members of the Chung family of their vulnerable status as unwanted outsiders. They, along with other Chinese in the United States, experienced segregation and other forms of discrimination on a daily basis. As a result, the overwhelming majority of Chinese Americans worked in low-status, labor-intensive occupations.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, Victorian gender norms subscribed to the concept of separate spheres, which assigned men and women different responsibilities on the basis of "inherent" gender differences.<sup>4</sup> Men, presumed to have

more rational minds and a will to dominate, occupied the public world; women, credited with innate moral purity and nurturing instincts, occupied the private realm of home and family. Becoming a medical doctor entailed transgressing these gender norms.

By the time of Chung's death in 1959, these racial and gender outlooks had been challenged, although not completely eclipsed, by more egalitarian values. In contrast to the rigid and hierarchical social structures associated with the Victorian era, modern society was beginning to celebrate the breaking of barriers and the seemingly limitless potential of individuals, regardless of race, gender, or nationality. The trajectory of Chung's life provides an opportunity to explore this transition from Victorian to modern America. Her experiences do not indicate an unbroken linear progression from segregation and hierarchy to integration and equality. Rather, Chung's strategies for advancement indicate the coexistence of contradictory norms, each with its own constraints as well as advantages. As much as she embraced modern changes, Chung also appropriated Victorian roles as she made and remade herself during various phases of her life.

Living through a period of such dramatic transition provided opportunities for Chung to fashion and refashion her identity. She transformed herself from a medical professional who adopted masculine clothing to a glamorous and feminine mother figure. She assimilated into mainstream and even elite American society but remained a symbol of China, a country that she never visited. She became a respectable public figure, yet she lived an unconventional private life that included developing romantic relationships with other women. Of course Chung did not have unlimited choice in creating her identities. However, by crafting multiple personas that catered to conflicting social expectations, Chung could challenge certain norms by affirming others. That is, she achieved acceptance because she demonstrated a dual ability to traverse social barriers and yet personify the immutability of social difference. By being all things to all people—Victorian and modern, maternal and masculine, asexual and transgressive, exotically different and mainstream—Chung symbolized and fulfilled the broader society's desire for transformation as well as stability, change as well as continuity.

#### NARRATING A LIFE

This biography presents the life of Margaret Chung in three acts.<sup>5</sup> Part 1 examines the influence of Christian missionaries on her



professional aspirations. During the late nineteenth century, white Protestant female reformers in the American West assisted in the adaptation of Chinese immigrants and promoted the medical training of Chinese women. Rather than reject the notion of inherent gender difference, female missionaries embraced the belief that women were naturally more moral and nurturing; medical training for women, in their view, would expand women's protective maternal influence over the broader society.<sup>6</sup> The white reformers also subscribed to the cultural superiority of Western religion and education. However, instead of advocating for racial exclusion, they sought to expose Chinese people to the benefits of American society. Steeped in these benevolent yet unequal relationships, Margaret Chung adopted the Christian missionary belief system to help her obtain a professional education during the early decades of the twentieth century.

Part 2 explores Chung's efforts to establish a sense of professional and personal belonging. Following her graduation from medical school in 1916, she relocated to Chicago. There, she came into contact with Progressive reformers, who used their scientific expertise to remedy the social problems of urban America. Chung returned to Southern California in the late 1910s and became a celebrity physician within the nascent Hollywood industry. She eventually settled in San Francisco, which boasted the largest Chinese neighborhood outside of China as well as an emerging "queer" subculture. During this period of her life, Chung traversed both geographic and social boundaries to gain entry into various communities. Despite her desire to serve people of her own ancestry and gender, Chung increasingly discovered greater acceptance among non-Chinese and men. Her friends, colleagues, and supporters tended to come from marginalized backgrounds due to their ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. Like Chung, they engaged in a struggle to gain social entitlement. However, they also embraced her out of desire to fulfill their fantasies about the exotic Orient and the comforting nurturance of women.

Part 3 examines the emergence and significance of Chung's surrogate maternal identity during the 1930s and 1940s. She initially created her family of "Fair-Haired Bastards" in the context of the Great Depression and the Sino-Japanese conflicts of the 1930s. As the United States officially entered World War II, Chung achieved national and even international fame as a symbol of U.S.-China unity. Her new celebrity status granted her access to the inner circles of American political power. Her respectability as a dedicated mother of the Allied fighting forces offered

some protection from allegations concerning her sexuality. However, Chung's experiences at the height of her popularity also reveal limitations to her strategy of gaining influence and acceptance by capitalizing on her Chinese ancestry and motherly persona.

Finally, an epilogue analyzes the legacy of Margaret Chung and examines why she received so little public or scholarly attention following World War II.

In this biography, I use the words "strategies" and "roles" to highlight Chung's efforts to create identities that satisfied her aspirations as well as the social norms of acceptability. To obtain insight into another person's consciousness is not an easy task, even when that individual writes an autobiography and leaves her imprint on historical records.<sup>7</sup> Like all people, Chung was selective in what she chose to present about her life. However, the variety, if not the completeness, of sources provides fragmented insights into her efforts to craft possibilities for herself.

To capture how historical forces shaped the choices as well as the constraints on Chung's life, this biography juxtaposes microscopic and macroscopic perspectives. The lens shifts back and forth between a focus on her and a broader portrayal of her times. In developing this depiction of Margaret Chung, I am cognizant of my role in highlighting certain experiences and shading others. Undoubtedly, another biographer would discover different aspects of her identity. It strikes me as particularly fitting that this should be so. After all, Margaret Chung's ability to perform multiple identities to diverse audiences goes a long way toward explaining her life accomplishments and makes her a particularly fascinating subject for study.



PART ONE

# Religion and Medicine



## “The Medical Lady Missionary”

I was born on the soil, drank the water, and breathed the air that is America. . . . I am particularly grateful to be a citizen of the United States with all of its privileges because my parents and my forefathers were Chinese, and had I been born in China I probably would have been thrown down the Yangtze River for I was the oldest of eleven children and most of us were girls. . . . Fortunately for me, both my parents were Christian and, therefore, believed in giving their daughters an equal opportunity to go to school.

To America and to Christianity, I owe all that I am, and ever hope to be.

Margaret Chung, “*Autobiography*”

Margaret Chung was born into a family, a country, and an era profoundly influenced by Christianity. Her mother, Ah Yane, and her father, Chung Wong, emigrated separately from China to the United States in the mid-1870s. In California, both converted under the influence of Presbyterian missionaries. The assistance offered by these white and mostly female reformers enabled Ah Yane and Chung Wong to survive and adapt in a new country. Furthermore, the Christian faith laid the foundation for their daughter’s aspiration to become a medical missionary among the Chinese people.

Margaret Chung’s chosen vocation reveals the influence of the largest women’s movement in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, the missionary enterprise. White, middle-class, American-born women constituted the overwhelming majority of the many thousands of female missionaries and their 3 million supporters.<sup>1</sup> However, the movement also sought to empower immigrants and nonwhites, especially women

of color, both in the United States and abroad. Enlisting the services of so-called native women benefited conversion efforts in two ways. First, "native" wives and mothers who converted could build Christian homes and raise Christian children. Second, a select few could be trained as missionary physicians. In that capacity, regardless of their marital or maternal status, they could gain access to "heathen" families by offering "healing for the body in one hand and healing for the soul in the other."<sup>2</sup>

The missionary movement both relied upon and challenged Victorian practices of gender separatism, immigration restriction, and segregation. The reformers justified women's entry into male professions such as medicine, as well as their travels across racial and national boundaries, by drawing on Victorian belief in woman's maternal nature. The missionary role was portrayed as a natural expansion of women's inclination to nurture, protect, and keep watch over the moral and physical well-being of her charges. Fears concerning racial mixing were minimized by emphasizing the ultimate goal of training "native helpers" who could then serve people of their own ancestry. The missionaries believed in the inherent goodness of their offerings. They sought to educate, elevate, and improve those they considered in need of instruction. While the missionary project imposed Western religious values and furthered the interests of American empire-building, it also provided opportunities for immigrant, especially female immigrant, advancement.

#### ARRIVING IN A CHRISTIAN LAND

Chung's parents came to the United States in the 1870s as part of the initial wave of Chinese immigration, which lasted from the 1840s until the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Propelled by economic and political instability in their homeland and lured by promises of opportunity and adventure in the developing American West, nearly three hundred thousand Chinese from the Canton (Guangdong) region arrived in Hawaii and the continental mainland during this period. The scant surviving sources on Chung's parents suggest that their lives mirrored the experiences of other Chinese in America, especially those of uncertain economic standing.

One of just nine thousand Chinese women to immigrate prior to 1882, five-year-old Ah Yane arrived in the United States in 1874.<sup>3</sup> The small numbers of female immigrants, constituting approximately 3 to 5 percent of the Chinese American population, resulted from a combination

of factors. Migration commonly represented a group decision. In order to obtain resources to support an ailing family economy, a representative traveled abroad to earn and remit income. For cultural and economic reasons, Chinese kinship networks overwhelmingly sent male representatives overseas. Traditional cultural values emphasized women's confinement to the home and their responsibility for taking care of the daily needs of the family. Women who did participate in the wage economy found opportunities more readily in China than in the United States. Finally, Chinese families hoped to ensure the return of their sons from far-away places by holding their wives and children "hostage."

In addition to these self-imposed reasons for limiting female migration, external factors also obstructed and eventually prevented Chinese women's entry into the United States. The racial hostility that Chinese immigrants faced, especially on the West Coast, discouraged them from establishing permanent roots in America. Capitalists initially welcomed Chinese workers as a form of "cheap labor" to develop the economic and transportation infrastructure of the West. In response, the white working class targeted Chinese immigrants, accusing them of undercutting their livelihoods. Middle-class Victorian Christian society also expressed disdain toward the practitioners of what they saw as a heathen culture. Thus, a wide spectrum of the American public regarded the Chinese as a temporary work force and not as permanent members of their society. Due to this combination of external and internal factors, few females came to the United States during the initial period of Chinese immigration.

The women who did migrate to the United States primarily came as prostitutes to serve the sexual needs of the overwhelmingly male Chinese population. In San Francisco, which had approximately thirty thousand Chinese residents in 1870, about 70 percent of all Chinese women worked in the sex trade. By 1880, the numbers had declined to 20 to 50 percent as a result of the passage of the 1875 Page Law, which prohibited the entry of women for "criminal or demoralizing purposes."<sup>4</sup> If Chung's mother had arrived after 1875, immigrant officials most likely would have denied her entry. They enforced the Page Law so strictly that all Chinese women were considered immoral until proven otherwise.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Ah Yane was very likely a prostitute-in-training.

Despite her youth, Ah Yane apparently arrived unaccompanied by family members.<sup>6</sup> Around the age of eleven—six years after her initial



entry to the United States—she was arrested in a San Francisco brothel on 12 October 1880 and placed in the Presbyterian Chinese Mission Home.<sup>7</sup> Her early years in the United States were harsh. Margaret Culbertson, the first superintendent of the mission home, recalled Ah Yane's initial arrival there: she was “small of stature, miserably clad in dirty garments, and in her flight had lost one of her shoes. . . . She [also] was suffering from a severe cough and a catarrhal difficulty.” Because of her youth, her size, and her grubby appearance, Ah Yane most likely served as a *mui tsai*, or servant girl, to the two older women who were arrested with her and who claimed to be her “mothers, No. 1 and No. 2.”<sup>8</sup>

As Margaret Chung reveals in the opening paragraph of her unpublished autobiography, poor families in China sometimes resorted to infanticide, abandonment, or selling their children in order to survive times of extreme distress.<sup>9</sup> Because Chinese society valued sons for their ability to carry on the family lineage, parents tended to sell their daughters, either as domestic servants or as prostitutes. Being sold as a servant, or *mui tsai*, then, represented a “form of charity for impoverished girls.”<sup>10</sup> The deed of sale usually stipulated their release at the age of eighteen. However, during their servitude, girls received no wages, did not have liberty to leave, and had no legal recourse against mistreatment, rape, or forced marriage.

In the United States, *mui tsai* frequently worked as domestic servants in wealthy Chinese households or in brothels. While some owners treated their *mui tsai* well, providing education as well as arranging marriages, others exploited the vulnerable girls. In fact, “Brothel owners often purchased young girls from China with the intention of using them first as domestic servants and then as prostitutes when they became older, thus maximizing their investment.”<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the small numbers of Chinese women in the United States increased the demand for and economic value of *mui tsai*. The Presbyterian Chinese Mission Home reported in 1882 that “since the advance in the price of young girls, from \$300 and \$400 to \$1000, they are guarded most jealously by their owners.”<sup>12</sup>

With such a heavy financial investment in Ah Yane, her owners refused to release her without a struggle. The Presbyterian missionaries appeared in court five times to obtain legal guardianship of Ah Yane. Her experiences were not unique. During the same year that she arrived at the mission home, the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children also placed seven other young girls there. From the perspective of the reformers, these girls had been betrayed by both their biological parents